

The Institution as Context

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Over the past two decades, institutional discourse has become an area of great import in the field of discourse analysis. Institutionalism is rife in everyday interactions, occurring in workplaces, homes, and schools, as well as both face-to-face and telephone or virtual interactions (Drew & Heritage, 1992). Essentially, whenever an individual represents an institution, institutionalism may color the discourse. In their seminal book, *Talk at Work*, Drew and Heritage (1992) define institutional talk as orienting to goals, constraining contributions, and shaping inferences. Following Drew and Heritage's framework, Waring (2005) identifies peer tutoring as a "privileged site for observing" institutional interactions, as "doing tutoring" is subject to goal orientation, constraints on allowable contributions, and unique inferential patterns (pp. 141-142). This piece focuses on one peer tutoring sequence to exemplify both *how* and *why* institutionalism is oriented to in talk.

The following data excerpt comes from a peer tutoring session at an undergraduate writing center at a major university in New York City. This excerpt occurred during the latter part of the tutoring session amid a series of grammar corrections given by the tutor, J.

The Possessive

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|---|------|--|
| 1 | J: | Because of <u>Mama</u> , you don't have the possessive here, |
| 2 | | either. |
| 3 | F: | {°Elena's. ° -((writes on paper))} I know:: I can't i- >yeah |
| 4 | | I know.< I'm <u>bad</u> at those for some reason. |
| 5 | J: → | Do you ever read it out loud to yourself? |

A conversation analytic perspective reveals *how* institutionalism is oriented to in the sequence. In lines 1-2, the tutor draws the tutee's attention to a grammar mistake with the statement "You don't have the possessive here, either." The tutee orients to the tutor's turn as an other-initiated repair move, indicated by his self-correction in line 2 in which he states the trouble source with a reduced volume as he writes in the apostrophe, this physical act demonstrating his acceptance of the advice. This uptake is followed by the self-deprecatory assessment *I'm bad at those for some reason* (line 4), the particular stress on the word "bad" adding further emphasis to the deprecation. At this point, the tutee's assessment serves as a first-pair part, for which a second-pair part in the form of an agreement or disagreement becomes conditionally relevant (Schegloff, 2007) and, considering the deprecatory nature of the assessment, a disagreement is preferred (Pomerantz, 1984; Schegloff, 2001). However, in a move that seemingly violates relevancy rules, the tutor instead initiates a new adjacency pair in line 5 by asking a topically relevant but conditionally irrelevant question (*Do you ever read it out loud to yourself?*), which serves to sequentially delete the tutee's self-deprecation. Notably, the tutor's violation of relevancy rules (Schegloff, 2007) is performed with a preferred format: there is no delay or hedging accompanying her response to the tutee. This suggests the possibility of a non-traditional preference organization shaping the sequence above. Indeed, Drew and Heritage

(1992) have posited that institutional discourse does not always conform to conversation turn-taking procedures (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Additionally, Lazaraton (1997) discovered that in the institutional context of the oral proficiency interviews for ESL course placement, agreement following a self-deprecation is actually dispreferred due to the goals of the institution. Thus, it is not surprising that the expected preference organization may be defied in the writing center setting. In not offering the relevant and preferred response of disagreement to the tutee's self-deprecations, the tutor may be orienting to the institutional goal of improving a written work in a fixed length of time. This hypothesis is supported by the nature of the tutor's turns following self-deprecation elsewhere in the data: the tutor violates conditional relevance twice to offer suggestions in the form of questions and once to other-initiate a repair, thereby performing tutoring-relevant acts. These topically-relevant first-pair parts suggest that the tutor may be sequentially deleting the tutee's self-deprecations in deference to the institutional constraints of the writing center.

Enriching the conversation analytic perspective, ethnographic information sheds lights on *why* institutionality is oriented to in this particular way by the tutor in line 5. In an interview conducted a year after the original data were collected, the tutor cited her personal knowledge of the student as a reason for her utterance in line 5, explaining, "He was a regular student of mine who frequently made the same mistakes but also frequently caught them on his own." The tutor then went on to explain that her awareness of the tutee's personality and habits led her to a hunch that a lack of self-confidence prevented him from self-editing. Thus, her question in line 5 was designed to see whether this hunch was true, and if so, to segue into instilling in him the confidence to edit papers without her assistance. As the tutor said, the tutee was "very bright" and should not use the writing center "as an excuse not to edit his papers" (personal communication, February 12, 2010). In other words, the ethnographic information specifies the motive behind the tutor's turn. The tutor's supervisor offers further insight into how the context of the writing center may have shaped the tutor's pedagogical strategies, stating that "reading aloud as a way to catch small errors" is a technique that has been "done in training" (personal communication, February 14, 2010).

The peer tutoring sequence analyzed above evinces the value of considering both the immediate context of the data and the extrinsic contextual frames that shape the data, as institutionality is produced through both. The non-traditional preference organization revealed by the conversation analytic perspective demonstrates the tutor's orientation to the institutional goals inherent to peer tutoring: time constraints and the improvement of written work. Additionally, the tutor's implicit suggestion embedded in her interrogative (line 5) display her orientation to "doing pedagogy" (Waring, 2007). This analysis is then enriched by the information that the tutor and tutee worked together regularly, prompting the question of how prior knowledge of interlocutors shapes our talk, and specifically, how it shapes teacher and tutor talk. Since the tutor was aware of the tutee's ability to self-correct, her question about whether he self-edited was a means of leading him to recognize his own capacity as a writer. Hence, although the tutor's utterance in line 5 neither agreed nor disagreed with the tutee's self-deprecation, the tutor did in fact disagree with his assessment. Rather than make this disagreement explicit, the tutor oriented to the issue of competence by working to build the tutee's autonomy, thus using the self-deprecation as an opportunity for pedagogy. These insights suggest that being mindful of the multifariousness of contexts can lead to deeper understandings of institutional interactions.

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